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ABSTRACT

This paper synthesizes explorations from two research projects with 3- and 4-year-olds in the areas of instrumental music-making and telephone discourse, sharing an approach to research with young children in which the adult participates in the child's activity and seeks to share the initiative. The interpretive, participatory approaches used are differentiated from data collection approaches that strive toward marking distance and detachment or obscure differences between the researcher and the child. Consequent to opening up spaces for dialogue in the research process are implications for the organization and analysis of data. Findings become related to children's evidenced processes of meaning-making rather than deficit-based measurements of competence or incompetence. The paper ends by sharing some specific structures for participatory research for children that may expose rather than conceal the challenging dilemmas posed by power differentials between adult and very young research participants. (Contains 39 references.) (Author/KB)

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Participatory research with young children: engagements in dialogue by instrumental music-making and telephone talk

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Abstract

In this paper we synthesise explorations from our research projects with three- and four-year-olds in the areas of instrumental music-making and telephone discourse, sharing an approach to research with young children in which the adult participates in the child's activity and seeks to share the initiative. We differentiate our interpretive, participatory approaches from those particularly associated with perspectives that strive either towards marking distance and detachment or obscuring differences between researcher and child. In our different fields of investigating sound production in interaction, we have endeavoured to design research methods to open up spaces for dialogue. Consequent to this are implications for the organization and analysis of data. Findings too become related to children's evidenced processes of meaning-making rather than deficit-based measurements of (in)competence. We end by sharing some specific structures for participatory research for children that may expose rather than conceal the challenging dilemmas posed by power differentials between adult and very young research participants.

Starting points

In this paper we seek to explore connections between our individual research methodologies in the Early Years and the ways in which those connections have caused us to trace links between working assumptions that affect methods at the most practical, everyday levels in research, and the theories that lie behind and in front of these. At first glance, it could seem that our work might have relatively little in common beyond qualities of age group and setting for investigation and the fact that neither of us had the starting point of being practising Early Years professionals. Both of us have been conducting research in English nursery classes among three- and four-year-olds. One of us, SY, has been exploring instrumental music-making and the other, JG, telephone talk. True, we are both examining the production of sound, but as defined in our culture very differently: the first as part of the world of music and the second as the world of language.

What we felt we did share, when we begun this dialogue about each other's work, is a certain approach to research that we seek to define in this paper. The starting point for both of us is a sense that we have been opening up spaces, - that while aware of the adult's power in interactions with young children, whether researchers or not, we have endeavoured to devise strategies whereby the children have been given opportunities to take initiatives themselves. Resultant interactions have become complex objects of analysis and the nature of that challenge in turn also has implications for the kinds of theoretical lenses through which we see children's behaviours.

Turning towards an interpretive paradigm

As Woodhead and Faulkner (2000:20) observe, Bronfenbrenner's (1979: 18-19) criticisms of developmental psychology remain topical today:

> ... much of developmental psychology, as it now exists, is *the science of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time*. (Emphasis as in original.)

Fortunately, there is now of course a strong strand in child development which adopts Bronfenbrenner's (1979) suggestion that researchers should aim for 'ecological validity' - the attempt, necessarily an aim rather than a matter of absolute achievement, that in all aspects of research - design, collection and analysis - the researcher takes into account the perception of the setting by the subject. Such an endeavour demands an appreciation of the essential subjectivity of the enterprise, the challenge that is involved in constructing meaningful research not premised upon an objectification that must remain impossible. Interpretive research, with its regard to the specifics of context, works against the positivist-inspired

> taken-for-granted notion of the child as a freestanding, isolable entity who moves through his or her development as a self-contained and complete individual." (Hatch, 1995: 119).

That construction of the child led to a common methodology of child development studies whereby groups of children, categorised according to demographic characteristics, are subject to pre- and post-tests, with a carefully controlled treatment of whatever kind administered in between in order to test a particular hypothesis. Much Early Years research strives towards the embodiment of distance and detachment that is associated with positivist paradigms (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) and that is particularly associated with a powerful tradition in developmental psychology. Graue and Walsh (1995: 138) make a cautionary warning regarding the possible dangers of this approach:

> We can learn something from such efforts, but what we learn is severely limited by the distance between the operationalization of the construct, which must be narrow to be technically defensible, and the construct as lived by children, which is inherently complex. The examples provide measures of something, but those somethings are tangential at best to children's friendships, their abilities to interact socially, or their curiosity. Researchers rarely mention the limitations of their efforts, and they talk as though they have actually studied such complex entities as the phenomena in the examples.

The pressures to conform to the paradigm centred upon experiential and analytical separation of research and 'subject' are comprehensible in an era when an ideologically-driven illusion of 'objectivity' is still wielded as an instrument by those most powerful in society. A professor of Early Years education once described to JG the intimidating effect of being told by a very senior civil servant that he had never read a 'rigorous' piece of Early Years research. She understood his 'rigour' to include a stance of

distance between researcher and 'subject', the operationalization of a narrow hypothesis into an instrument of quantitative measurement, and the subsequent manipulation of measures into statistics that purport to present clear correlations, bracketing out the complexities of all social life including most clearly the research process itself.

Reason (1994: 333) proposes an approach to participative inquiry that stems in part from an opposition to the above construct of 'rigour'. He suggests that the methods of research should stem from

> "understanding of how ideology and epistemology, knowledge and power, are bound up together. If an inquiry is primarily engaged in the service of a dominant class it will not need to dialogue with people: it is not interested in their reality, but rather in imposing on them a dominant reality. On the other hand, if an inquiry is engaged in the service of the development of people, it will necessarily *engage with them in dialogue*." (emphasis added)

Hearkening to Reason, we endeavour to embody this stance in our work with young children. There are two strands to our thinking then in 'engaging with them in dialogue': one leading to specific research methods designed to open spaces for dialogue in music and on the telephone; and the second tied up with a view of children as 'being' not 'becoming' (Morrow and Richards, 1996), or refusing to accept a deficit-based model of childhood but as seeking, necessarily imperfectly, to move towards appreciations of what their experiences mean to them.

In the two sections that follow, we move into the first person in order for us each to attempt to convey a slice of our particular experience. Rather than make generalizations across our research, we present specific snatches of experience, obviously as refracted through memory and writing processes, that we hope will give the reader some insight into the nature of our data and methods, plus, a necessarily highly imperfect and multiply refracted glimpse into what these events might have been like for the children. We have chosen to explore here memories of a particularly crucial point for each of us - moments when we moved into a more participatory role. We should say that even when we were acting with less obvious agency, primarily as 'observers' we nevertheless (as we shall discuss further below) fully accept, with Labov (1972), that to be an 'observer' is to participate in that observation entails having an effect upon that observed. Be that as it may, these moments considered below are from the stages (relatively late in the data collection process for each of us) when we were moving from a primarily observing role to one of more direct interaction with children.

Researching young children's instrumental music making (SY)

Spontaneous, self-initiated play with instruments is one of the activities commonly provided for young children in a typical UK nursery environment. A range of educational percussion instruments and other found and home-made sound-makers are set out in a designated area. In my study I set out to understand some fundamental processes which underlie this form of musical activity among three- and four-year-olds.

However, an immediate problem forced a rethinking of the study during its earliest stages and drew attention to the role of the adult in children's music play. Even when music areas were set up with (apparent) variety of provision, the children rarely played with the instruments for any length of time. Subsequent tinkering with the instrument set-ups and varying the kinds of instruments on offer did result in increased play on the part of the children, but it occurred to me that this increase was probably due as much to my demonstration of involvement and interest in the instruments, as to do with material changes. As the study progressed, music-making as a form of shared, interactive play with an adult partner became a main theme. This focus challenges dominant conceptions of musical activity in music education, both in practice and research (Young, 1999a). Characteristically, music-making is thought of as an individual pursuit and musical activity as, intrinsically, arising from co-operative action is downplayed.

In keeping with this dominant conception, prior studies of children's music-making have considered the musical mind and behaviour of the individual child as quite distinct from any social engagement (e.g. Swanwick and Tillman, 1986). That having been said, a careful reading of the handful of studies which have looked closely at children engaged in spontaneous, self-directed musical activity in free-play settings reveals many indications of music as made between children and adults or among pairs and groups of children (e.g. Pond, 1981, Cohen, 1980; Barrett, 1996). Yet, in the final evaluations, the children's musical activity is repositioned in the mind of the individual child.

At first, the intention had simply been to attend to the children's music play as interested listener, showing an active response (Young, 1995). By this stage, also, the study had narrowed to a focus on just one instrument, the xylophone. The varied possibilities for movement play afforded by even a modest array of instruments forced a narrowing of choice in the interests of study manageability. Sitting close by the instrument and taking an active interest in the children's music play soon prompted me to begin to join in. This was not a premeditated decision but one which seemed called for by involvement in the children's playing. After a few sessions in which I explored the adult role as music play partner, it was defined by a protocol which stipulated only reactive responses and no initiation of new ideas. The video clip which accompanies this presentation shows one such interaction early in the second phase of the study when the partnering protocol had been established.

But before continuing I will briefly describe the analytical methods. In this study I have avoided any form of conventional musical analysis. Converting children's music-making into notation, as has been the dominant method in almost all studies, is already a stringent form of analysis which filters out all but a sonic sliver of pitch and rhythm relationships. From this minimal information many researchers have assumed to discover telling clues about the nature of children's spontaneous activity with instruments.[1] Instead, I have repeatedly reviewed the video recordings I collected in

[1] Notably Tillman (1987) whose analysis of three or four young children's 'compositions' by this method provided the data for a model of musical development (Swanwick and Tillman, 1986) which has been internationally influential.

their entirety and this immersion process has given rise to categories of behaviours. Additional information has been revealed by microanalyses of two subsequently selected samples. The multi-modal nature of children's play on instruments, incorporating as it does sound, visual information, movement and social interplay poses particular challenges to analysis (Young, 1999b).

In the sample music play episode presented here, the child begins to play with some simple vertical striking and sweeping movements across the xylophone. At first I just listen, and venture two attempts to join in the child's music play. Both of these contributions are ignored, although close watching of the video reveals that the child is glancing to the side and making some first eye contact. As the play proceeds, I imitate a simple glissando to which the child immediately re-echoes so that the simplest of turn-taking games evolves. In this game the child looks at both me and the xylophone in quick alternation, an indicator that he is integrating communication with another and object-play with the xylophone (Trevarthen and Hubley, 1978). The very simplicity of this game belies what is really happening here. To sustain the turn-taking each circular, glissando-producing movement must be well-timed to dovetail with the partnering actions. They are not isolated movements which follow one another separated by pauses of inactivity but are coordinated as one shared act, with an implicit and empathetic understanding of its qualities of time, space and energy. Yet the result is a composite, expressive whole which, through its simple game format, is 'meaningful' to both adult and child.

A time-line analysis (not shown in this paper) shows that some of my contributions were not taken up by the child. The child is in control. I consider myself, as adult play partner, to be one more resource, part of a dynamic system of child, instrument and adult, each presenting the child with sets of constraints and possibilities which he takes up at will. He actively determines the nature and extent of the influence of others, appearing to respond to whatever aspect of the context is currently most salient and adaptable to his own priorities. However, in listening and playing with him, I am attempting to adapt affectively, cognitively and musically to his world. The way I play might be thought of as the musical equivalent of 'infant directed speech'. Notice too that permission given by the child for the adult to play was usually granted by eye contact and an invitation to continue and increase the level of interaction was conveyed via raised levels of glancing and positive facial expression of smiling and laughing.

That these particular characteristics of children's music-making require particular conditions of adult interaction to flourish is clearly, I think, demonstrated by the last sample of video. This is a valuable reminder that, however sensitively we may endeavour to interact with children, lapses will occur that can be revealed through later study of video footage. The instruction to K. to 'sit on the mat' and 'play me something' falls well outside my protocol but, even so, matches many of the studies in which young children have been asked to 'make a piece of music' or 'sing me a song' (e.g. Flohr, 1981; Tillman, 1987). In response K. is initially hesitant and inhibited. After some time shared play is achieved when I match the timing and content of my own playing in a more reciprocal relationship; K responds with evident pleasure and settles into a playing rhythm.

In my view, these samples of video show children demonstrating as fully as possible the proclivities for music-making which they possess when enabled to do so by the researcher, when she explores methods of sharing the initiative.

Researching young children's telephone talk (JG)

Only a limited amount of research has been carried out into the development of young children's telephone discourse. Earlier research has taken place in highly controlled settings, where spontaneity was either discouraged or constrained. I will briefly review the approaches of the three sets of developmental psychologists who have investigated young children talking on the telephone with adults. This will better illuminate the possibilities - and perils - that relative uncertainty brought to my own research design.

Bordeaux and Willbrand (1987) collected data from 20 children aged 2 to 5 years according to the assumption that they key quality in the research process is ensuring consistency of conditions. The authors claim their research is 'developmental' although they are actually relying on one set of snapshot pictures of behaviours by children of different ages. The high degree of artificiality of the design afforded results that were interpreted primarily according to what the children failed to do; for example: "... children from 2 to 5 years do not use telephone discourse imitating behaviors or discourse rules."

In my opinion the findings are highly explicable by consideration of the processes involved. Foregrounded is a significant conclusion, "Initiating behaviors were only beginning to emerge by 5 years." (Ibid: 253). To my mind any other such 'result' was unlikely to emerged owing to two strong features of the experimental set-up: (i) the purpose and substance of the calls were contrived by the researchers; (ii) the possibility that an imbalance of power between children and adults might have an effect on the children's behaviours was ignored.

Warren and Tate (1992) compared adult-child interactions in face-to-face condition and on the telephone. They sought to measure 'egocentric errors' (defined in a way hard to relate to the pre-existing theories of Piaget and Vygotsky referred to) in each channel. Again, the artificiality of the study design is extreme, with findings I find readily interpretable in the light of considering the process. For example, in one study of face-to-face interactions all 'props' - toys etc. were explicitly disallowed. The researchers found that the adults showed a high reliance on questions: my reaction is that this was explicable in terms of the what the adult participants inferred to be the researchers' goals - obtaining samples of children's talk in circumstances strange to the child. Warren and Tate's approach is dominated by the assumption that children are less than competent and that their deficiencies are measurable and demonstrable with the aid of statistics.

C.A. Cameron and colleagues employ many research instruments of developmental psychology, including the use of laboratory experiments, measurements of phenomena and the use of statisitical tools, yet in enterprises where the aim is to strive towards comprehension of the children's capabilities, understandings and behaviors when talking on the telephone. For example, Cameron and Lee's (1997) paper reports on a

referential communication task undertaken by 60 children distributed evenly across the 2 to 8 year old age range - plus a group of 10 adults for comparison. The procedures were carefully worked out to make 'human sense' to the protagonists, and ingenious methods of categorising and measuring responses were achieved. The children had to convey a solution to a puzzle (involving the moving of geometric shapes differentiated by various markings) to a listening adult who held the same puzzle and responded to instructions in a neutral (but not cold) way. The findings were most impressive; because it made sense for the children to do so, even the youngest children showed some adaptation to the channel, making more adequate instructions over the telephone than in person (Cameron and Lee, 1997: 66).

My investigation of children's telephone talk over a nine-month period in a nursery was partly driven by the wish to allow children the decision as to when and how to participate. The moments I am looking back at here, during the first session of Phase 3, were significant for me in that my stance as a researcher had suddenly changed considerably, from a largely 'observer' role to a 'participatory' role.

I need therefore to outline briefly the study design of the preceding phases before proceding to describe the situation under consideration here. In Phase 1 of the study a child-sized telephone box had been introduced to the nursery as one of the many available choices for play and the children's spontaneous pretence calls were recorded. In the second phase of research, begun a few months later, a second telephone was added around the corner from the first for children to talk with one another. This was connected to the first in a specially devised system so that no dialling or ringing was necessary - the two phones were always connected and the talk from them collected observed and recorded

In phase 3 my involvement changed. The second telephone was moved from its position in the nursery to another position in the school (inside a store cupboard), where I sat ready to receive calls. I had already decided to make my participation as a telephone interlocutor as essentially reactive, even passive, rather than dominating. This strategy owed to a desire to work against the notion that the adult's performance is necessarily a model, against which children are measured to the degree to which they fail. Further, Veach (1981) identified the most important way in which I could in practice endeavour to put this strategy into practice: her painstaking Conversation Analytic approach revealed that the principle way in which adults can effectively dominate conversations is by imposing their turntaking mechanisms. Toleration of long pauses I decided would be essential in order to open up the space for children to take the initiative.

On the particular early Summer afternoon I am looking back at now, 17 children - 9 girls and 8 boys came to the nursery, aged between 3' 3" (3 years 3 months) and 4' 7" (4 years 7 months). From the very first call I found that putting my planned strategy of being a relatively passive interlocutor into practice was not necessarily going to lead to dramatic results at once. The first caller, Megan, put the phone down after her initial 'hello' was responded to apparently taking a greater interest in other activities in the nursery. The fourth call begun with 2 exchanges of 'hello'. Callum then asked, "What are you doing?" My feeble response, "I'm sitting talking to you," seemingly caused him to turn to talk to someone else outside the box without hanging up. He then initiated a

sequence of 24 'hello's' although these contained some reciprocated playing with varying tone and pitch.

Keeping to my aim of responding appropriately was not always easy, as the following call shows:

Call 7 Callum 4' 0"

Time	*Child's speech [actions in square brackets]*	*Researcher's speech*
0.00	[picks up telephone]	
0.01	Hello	
0.03	Hello	
0.05		Hello
	[dials]	
0.10	Bye bye	
		Hello
0.13	Bye bye	
		Oh bye bye
0.15	[hangs up]	

One significant finding was that the research design gave children the opportunity to question the researcher's agenda - which of course remained in my power: see my lame reply to Katie's valid questioning below:

Call no. 29 Katie 4' 4"

Time	*Child's speech [actions in square brackets]*	*Researcher's speech*
0.00	[picks up phone]	
	Hello	
		Hello
0.03	Er - I - where are you going?	
0.08		Where am I going? I'm not going anywhere at the moment
0.10	Where are you?	
		I'm in the store cupboard off the library

0.16	What?	
		I'm in the store cupboard next to the library
0.19	Oh	
		I'm in the nursery store cupboard
0.22	Why?	
0.24	Is there t- is that telephone there?	
		Yes it is now, yes
0.29	Why?	
		Well so that there's two telephones, one there and one here
0.36	Er is there tea party there?	
		No there's no tea party, there's only me
0.42	Oh. Bye	
		Bye bye
00.45	[hangs up. exits.]	

This call as many others (by both boys and girls) from this session, is remarkable in the face of earlier research upon children's telephone discourse in the competence displayed. Katie shows the ability to open and close a call, to initiate and develop topics. The research design created the opportunity for children to display considerable competencies, greater I could claim than other studies even involving older children, have shown (see e.g. Bordeaux and Willbrand, 1987, as discussed above; J. Holmes, 1981).

Yet, as with SY's work, the aim of this writing is not simply self-congratulation on a 'successful' piece of research that has shown genuinely new results. As I look back, it appears to me that the children are unerring, when given the opportunity, in pointing out the arbitrariness of the power exercised by the researcher in moving the second telephone. The simple and challenging "Why?" at 0.29 above was also uttered by several other children during conversations with me and at times became several turns of interrogation. To be honest, it felt at the time inconvenient to be so put on the spot yet on reflection heartening evidence that I had left a space for children to question the research design. Children's lives are highly circumscribed; while thinking genuinely of how to enhance their experiences both as a result of and through the process of research, it needs to be remembered that what we are really thinking about is small modifications in the balance of power.

Encapsulation of our approach to research design

From building upon the useful insights of others and our own research we experiences we now summarise our approach to research design. (For a complementary account of a synthesis of findings see Young and Gillen, 2000). We are not trying here to give a 'big picture', depicting for example the ethnographic approaches and sensitivities that appear esssential to grasping the sense of localized meaning-making and larger scale emergent configurations of society (Hymes, 1996). Rather we are assuming the constraints of a small study and in this section narrowing down our focus onto 'methods'. This is intended not as a static set of maxims for ourselves or anyone else, but rather a reflection of our current practice for discussion:

1 With Corsaro (1985) we have a preference for observing children in the locations where they are ordinarily situated rather than taking them into laboratories. We agree also with him that snapshot studies also mitigate against the possibility of gaining background information on their own meanings assigned to their own activities and environments that is potentially of great value.

2 Young children's everyday settings will very likely be modified in order to encourage the production of relevant data but only if such a modification is in the nature of a positive addition to the children's environment, as judged through their reactions and the prior agreement of caregivers;

3 Agreeing with Mandell (1998) that there is a dilemma inherent in the researcher's role in qualitative research with young children, we disagree with her that the gap between adults and children can be bridged and then discounted. For us, the strategic notion espoused by herself and R. Holmes (1998) that reducing physical differentials and 'taking part' in the child's world can lead to a 'least adult' role is delusional. Neither do we believe with Sawyer (1996) that the researcher's presence can be effectively eliminated through being regularly present but always ignoring the children; to us this is as unethical as Axia's (1996) secret recordings of children and their parents. (It is interesting to note that these treatments have not been a barrier to the referees and publishers of their work).

4 Rather than commission tasks as in virtually all research on children's telephone discourse and instrumental music-making to date (Gillen, 1999; forthcoming; Young, 2000a; 2000b) to create opportunities for self-initiated, spontaneous child actions. Finely judged passivity and silence on the part of the researcher can be experienced as enabling by the child. With Vygotsky (1999) the types of investigations that appear particularly useful are microgenetic, where a process of change (possibly over a single session, but very likely over a more extensive period) is investigated in depth.

5 We consider that early childhood research data is most useful if it is multi-modal, for example by means of video recording, in order to capture facets of

the children's interactions including bodily movements, beyond their individual output of sounds or words.

6 Although detailed discussions of data analysis instruments is beyond the scope of this paper, we have found useful a range of methods, including, most centrally, a devised approach of initial transcription that is reflexively created by the researcher, emergent as it were from the specifics of the context and research issues. The aim of this first stage is to record complex data, without too much reduction.

7 The amount of data collected and analysed will of course be dependent upon a range of factors. However we both feel that, whatever decisions are made in this regard, we feel, with Vygotsky (1999: 20-23) that the relationship between the child and the investigator is a paramount process for investigation (whether or not the researcher is actually present at any particular time). For the child's process of attaching meaning to a situation comes about through their relations with significant people in their environment, that includes the investigator.

End point: an issue of power

Donaldson et al. (1983:6) propose that researchers should "look actively for the things which children can do." While endorsing this vision of high expectations, it possibly nevertheless contains the possibility of a trap for researchers. In constructing a framework within which to 'look actively' we may be erecting strong boundaries against the unexpected, that actually may be a forceful constraint. Participatory research involves a yielding of control, a sharing of power that can feel unsettling. (Abbott and Gillen, 1999).

There are particular challenges involved in trying to 'empower' young children in that accepting their meaning-making derived from the wider culture necessitates, in our opinion, the researchers' acceptance in turn of facets of the 'realities' felt by children and their caregivers. Broader patterns of relationships between children and adults set up expectations that we would be unwise and even morally wrong to ignore. We have to work with and largely accept the role children offer us. Elsewhere JG has written about ethical difficulties faced in her study when children cast her as 'mother' (Gillen, 1999; 2000). SY found that because her work was more audible and visible some adults in the nursery were irritated when children appeared to have the 'upper hand' in the music play. They perceived the children as 'getting their own way' or even as being 'bossy'. SY's feeling was that their encouragement of 'free play' was at times overriden by their desire to feel that adults are definitely in control.

We agree with Graue and Walsh (1998:79-80) that at the same time for the researcher an opportunity may exist to make boundaries between adulthood and childhood relatively elastic, but that such agency requires careful thinking through:

> It is just as disrespectful to figure that children will not notice these boundaries if we are skilful fieldworkers as to assume that these boundaries are developmentally and irrevocably imposed.

Enacting (possibly while ignoring) power differentials has necessarily influenced childhood research; our imperative must be to bring these considerations to the surface; potential rewards for all participants appear substantial.

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